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C O N F I D E N T I A L YEREVAN 002081

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SUBJECT: LOCAL OBSERVERS CITE MAJOR INFRACTIONS, STOP SHORT
OF CALLING REFERENDUM RESULTS INVALID

REF: YEREVAN 2074

Classified By: Amb. John M. Evans for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

1. (C) It's Your Choice (IYC), Armenia's largest election observation NGO (funded in part by the USG), announced during a November 29 press conference that there were major infractions during the recent referendum on constitutional amendments that had "serious impacts on the results." They stopped short, however, of saying that the November 27 referendum results were invalid or that the amendments had not been adopted as a result of the voting. Harut Hmbardzumyan, Director of It's Your Choice, said that observers were present for at least part of the day on November 27 in 1,300 polling stations. He listed ballot stuffing, open voting and intimidation of observers as some of the worst infractions. Hmbardzumyan blasted both the GOAM for "grossly inflated numbers" and the opposition for "exaggerating the low turnout." IYC would not estimate how many voters in fact showed up at the polls for the referendum but said that anecdotal evidence in at least ten polling stations suggested that election officials had inflated the figures by 300-400 percent. IYC gave us a 12-page summary of its findings following the press conference detailing the major violations it observed.

2. (C) IYC was extremely critical of the Council of Europe's (CoE) statement on the election. Hmbardzumyan called into question the validity of the report given the small number of delegates the CoE sent to Armenia to observe the referendum. He made special note of local press reports that the CoE delegation was divided in its opinion on the voting and that the CoE statement diverged from comments made by individual members during their November 28 press conference. With the exception of print media, IYC told us that participation by media was less than it had expected. Only four local television stations (and none of the government stations) covered the IYC press conference.

3. (C) Comment: We were disappointed by the turnout during IYC's press conference and will be carefully watching media coverage of its findings over the next few days. Notably absent from the event was Armenia TV, part of the media group funded by an American-Armenian who earlier pledged that his station would be the standard for "balanced coverage" of the referendum. By criticizing both the GOAM and opposition final numbers on the referendum as well as the CoE's statement, IYC is not going to have many enthusiastic supporters here in Yerevan for its final report. Nevertheless, as the observer organization with the largest coverage of polling places on November 27 and the most experience with election monitoring, IYC is still our best source for first-hand information regarding the integrity of the vote.

EVANS